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Leadership and culture: comparative models of top civil servant training

Bruno Broucker^a

^a KU Leuven Public Governance Institute

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BOOK REVIEW

Leadership and culture: comparative models of top civil servant training, edited by Montgomery Van Wart, Annie Hondeghem, Erwin Schwella, Hampshire, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, 376 pp., US\$115 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-137-45412-6

This book's ambitious objective is twofold: first, to provide an in-depth understanding and analysis of the senior civil service and its training in 19 countries spread over the different continents. The countries together represent, in accordance to House' typology (2004), the Anglo-Saxon countries, Eastern Europe, Germanic Europe, Latin Europe, Latin America, the Nordic countries, Sub-Saharan Africa and Confucian Asia. The second objective of this book is to go well beyond the classic identification of training by analyzing patterns across regions and by identifying factors stimulating both the need for training and its quality. To do so, the authors constructed a framework that could capture the societal, political and organizational-administrative context to situate top civil servant training. This book review wants to provide an answer on three questions: why is this book worth reading? Did the authors succeed in their objectives? Who should read this book?

Why is this book worth reading? The first reason refers to the particularly relevant timing of the book. In a context where administrations are under pressure given the (1) complexity and extent of responsibilities they are confronted with, (2) the growth of expectations toward public service delivery, and (3) the economic and budgetary pressures that force governments to be more efficient than ever, the necessity and the importance of qualified top civil servants, who are able to innovate, communicate and collaborate successfully have only grown over the years. The importance of top civil servants is recognized by numerous countries: a growing tendency can be identified to treat that organizational level as a distinct cluster within the administration. Some examples of this 'distinct treatment' are the existence of a Senior Executive Service in South-Korea, Australia and the United States, a Senior Civil Service in Romania or *De Algemene Bestuursdienst* in the Netherlands. Within that trend, it seems obvious that an appropriate training for the top civil service is equally considered as vital: indeed, not only has, since many years, leadership development been considered of great importance to organizational performance (Riggio, 2008), it also has to be acknowledged that training of top civil servants becomes now, more than ever, an essential piece of the puzzle to create that future generation of top civil servants capable of handling the variety of challenges administrations face. However, notwithstanding that universal recognition of the necessity to invest in top civil servant training, public organizations seem to cut their budget for training and education because its return on investment is regularly questioned (Broucker, 2014). The editors of this book have been able to clarify that paradox by identifying eight factors influencing the level of support for stronger training regimes. This is particularly interesting because apart from the perception of competency gaps, (which has always been a classic factor determining organizations' investment in training), they also highlight, among others, the importance of the

government's perception on its administrative system and the number of advocates of training and development. Herewith, the editors provide a considerable larger and richer perspective on top civil service training, the way it is institutionalized, how it is perceived and what its role within an administration is or can be.

The second reason refers to the exceptional and extensive international comparison this book offers. It not only combines the expertise of a large number of HRM-experts in different parts of the world, but it also draws the attention of the reader to the large range of practices across the countries. That diversity is present in many aspects: the presence or absence of competency frameworks and the way they develop over time, as it is the case in the UK; the central/decentralized position of a training institute within the administration, such as the Austrian Central Training Institute of the Federal Chancellery or the decentralized training institutes in Germany focusing on specific policy domains; the level of privatization of the training (the UK); the presence or absence of pre-entry training, like for instance the Mandatory Specialized Training Program for Romanian civil servants preparing for a top level position; the teaching methods used and the way they are combined, like for instance the Australian principle of aiming at 70% on the job learning, 20% relationship-based learning and 10% training; the role of universities, such as the position of the Copenhagen Business School or the Hungarian National University of Public Services which is a collaboration between administration, police and military. In other words: this book addresses all relevant topics concerned with leadership training, expectations toward leadership competencies, the way training is organized, the training programs and the teaching methods used. The combination of all those cases together make this book a rich international comparison about leadership development for top civil servants, a book that has been missing in literature until now.

A third reason why to read this book deals with the attention that is drawn to the difference between careerist and noncareerist. The former are civil servants growing throughout the years in the administration through a system of promotion or internal vacancies. The latter are temporarily appointed top civil servants from the private sector, non-profit sector or even from the political system. The editors highlight the training need of careerist, who started as experts, in general management and leadership training and the distinct training need of noncareerist in short term training in the technical and legal aspect of the organization. This distinction not only highlights the diverse training needs, but more essentially, it accentuates the bond between career path and training and the influence each has on the other.

Did the editors succeed in their objectives? While reading the many country chapters and being introduced in each one of them, more than the (history of the) top civil service training system, its characteristics, components and quality are highlighted by the experts on the matter. Thought-provoking is that the level of pure portrayal is left behind and that the complexity of the top civil service training system in an administrative, political, social and economic environment, is remarkably clarified. Some countries are characterized by strong centralization, others face politicization, fiscal stress or even corruption,...which influence to a large extent how administrations are constituted and what role training has in it. The editors have succeeded in elucidating why the amount of attention toward leadership training is larger in one country than in another, and have shown that good training goes hand-in-hand with a well performing administration. While some countries, like South-Africa, are still struggling to develop an efficient, impartial and well

performing civil service, other countries, like Switzerland, basically focus their attention to ameliorations of the system. This has undoubtedly an effect on the level and quality of top civil service training. The editors also conclude by stating that 'few authors did not find extensive gaps, severe limitations in resources, holes in the development model and a general lack of coherence in current training options' (p. 347), which only states that this book is indeed an in-depth analysis, critical and amelioration-driven. The way the future administrative elite are trained matters, given its importance within the quality of the administration as a whole.

Who should read this book? The book provides a large inspirational overview of training systems, their influencing factors and in its final chapter a list of recommendations to develop and ameliorate top civil service training. Therefore, two large groups of audiences can be particularly interested in reading this book. The first group consists of (potential) top civil servants, policy makers responsible for public administration and staff of HR departments at the central and decentralized level. Why? Because they are all concerned with the continuous and sustainable development of the public sector and because training for civil servants is one of the factors that can contribute positively to that development. The book is an opportunity to think out-of-the-box, to look at the system you are familiar with from a different perspective and to find inspiration to improve what can be ameliorated. The second group of potentially interested readers consists of training institutes, Public Administration scholars in general and HR scholars in particular. Why? Because of the importance to understand how leadership within the public administration is created and what role it can fulfill; because they have an important responsibility in offering the necessary expertise for the training of the future administrative elite; because they need to know what factors they have to take into account if they want to develop a training program that has the highest possible impact; and because the book represents a piece of the puzzle in the continuous search to understand why certain administrations work the way they do.

Overall, this international comparative book is a very rich and considerable achievement in creating an added value to the huge amount of leadership literature by focusing on the top level and the need to develop their competencies. It provides an interesting approach and suitable framework to understand top civil service training and its position within the administration. And it is, in the context wherein many administrations are situated, particularly relevant. As the authors state: 'the Senior Civil Service is a precious commodity and we would be well-served to ensure that those with such great responsibilities are fully up-to-task' (p. 2). In sum: this book is a significant new contribution to the study of administrative leadership.

Notes on contributor

Bruno Broucker (PhD Social Sciences) is post-doctoral researcher and lecturer at the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute, Belgium. His current research topics are leadership development, higher education policy and governance and change management. Email: Bruno.Broucker@kuleuven.be

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Bruno Broucker

KU Leuven Public Governance Institute

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